

## Emissary of the Void, Part III

By Greg Keyes; Illustration by Mike Huddleston

Space was about to kill Uldir Lockett and his crew in a most unpleasant manner. Although it wasn't the first time the void had tried to snuff him out -- not by a gigaparsec -- Uldir still had plenty of objections.

"We're losing atmosphere, fast," He muttered, combing his fingers through the switches and indicators at the helm of his transport, the *No Luck Required*. "But where?" His voice already sounded unnaturally thin, and his eardrums felt like they were going to explode. How soon before his blood started to boil?

*Stop thinking about that. That's not helping.*

"Where do you suppose?" asked Vega Sepen, his first officer, her eyes flashing like corusca gems beneath her platinum bangs. "It's not complicated. Your girlfriend jammed the starfighter bay open."

"Well, seal it off!" he snapped, returning the Corellian's glare. "And do not call her my girlfriend."

"Touchy," Vega said. "You shouldn't let one little spat bust up a good thing. I mean, she only sabotaged our hyperdrive, stole our only hyperdrive-capable starfighter, and left us bleeding air."

"Yeah? You sound jealous to me, Sepen," he snapped.

"Oh, yes, of course," Vega said, studying the system indicators. "I've got the big hurt for you, all right. I'm going to make my move as soon as you're out of diapers."

Her voice sounded weird. The falling pressure, probably.

"Boss . . ." Vega went on, in a more normal tone.

"What?"

"It won't seal."

"Sithspawn!" He raised his voice, trying to project it through the thinning air. "Vac suits, everyone, now!" He rose to his feet and found his legs wobbly. He suppressed a giggle as the situation suddenly seemed amusing. Was harder-than-corundum Vega Sepen actually jealous of the rogue Jedi? Vega was like a tough older sister -- there had never been anything between them.

Nor was there anything between him and Klin-Fa Gi. She had been an irritating mynock on his hull from the second they met, and that was before she had tried to kill him and his crew.

Another funny thing, this one a real side-splitter. He was pretty sure he didn't have time to make it to the storage lockers before passing out. Why hadn't he thought of the vac suits first? Where was his brain?

*Oh, right. Starving for oxygen.*

He couldn't help it. He laughed at that one. The galaxy was the best practical joker ever.



He was still chuckling when he tripped over Leafth. The Dug had collapsed in a pile, his limbs sticking up at odd angles. His normally ferocious face actually looked sort of cute with no surly consciousness to animate it. And he had brought some blankets to curl up on, or was it laundry?

*No, those are the vac suits, you idiot, some stubbornly rational part of Uldir snarled. You forgot. Leafth didn't.*

His vision was blurring. He didn't have long. He put the helmet on first and twisted the feed valve, then started shimmying into the suit. The fresh air smelled good, but his lungs couldn't get much of it -- not enough pressure, without a seal between suit and helmet.

A bunch of black holes suddenly appeared in the bulkhead. Yuuzhan Vong voids? Were they under attack, now, on top of everything else?

"That's it," he muttered. "I give up."

He did, too, as the black holes devoured the ship, the light, and finally Uldir Lochett.

\* \* \*

He awoke to the hiss of air in his helmet. The flat face of a Duro was staring at him with concern. The Duro was wearing a vac suit. It took him a confused moment to understand that it was Vook, the fourth member of his crew. It took only another heartbeat to recall his last memories.

"Leafth, Vega! We have to -- "

"Already done, Boss-boy," Vega's voice sounded tinny in his helmet transceiver. "We're all okay. Leafth's a little on the puny side -- "

"I'm fine," the Dug snarled. He sounded more groggy than convincing.

"Good work, Leafth, going for the suits," Uldir said. "Next time, remember to put yours on first. Always."

"Hrrm. Basic training. Wasn't thinking straight, though." Leafth sounded chagrined, which was a rarity. "Thinking like a human," he added. That was more like Leafth. Uldir was relieved.

"Vook was thinking straight, at least," Vega said.

Vook looked embarrassed, but said nothing.

"Okay," Uldir said, wobbling to his feet. "Let's see what's wrong and fix it."

"And then?" Leafth growled.

"Then we go get our starfighter back and make a certain Jedi experience a great deal of remorse."

\* \* \*

Uldir was with Vook in the engine crawlway, puzzling over the defunct hyperdrive, when Vega stuck her head down from above.

"We got the outer doors sealed," she said.

"And the inner?"

"Well, it's good news and bad news," Vega allowed. "The bad news is she cut through the inner doors with her lightsaber, so we're going to have to patch them. Leafth's on that. The good news -- I guess this is good news -- she didn't jam the outer doors on purpose. She banged the mechanism with the A-wing when she took off."

"Then she didn't intend for us to die," Uldir mused.

"Think not? So you plot she hasn't gone over to the dark side?"

"If she were truly rogue, she would hardly have any compunction about killing us. She could have torped us, for that matter, to make sure of it."

"I think you're still woozy," Vega said. "She stranded us in Vong space without a hyperdrive, twenty light-years from anywhere. She cut the hyperwave antenna, too, so we can't call for help. That in itself is a death sentence. A slow, cruel one. Very dark."

"Maybe she figured we could fix one or the other."

"She knew we were already in bad shape, that we needed supplies to effect repairs." Vega cocked her head. "Don't forget, she's on her way to Wayland. She must be after some of the Emperor's old toys. Even if she hasn't given in to the dark side, she must be right at the shatter zone."

"Yeah," Uldir assented. "I'll give you that. We just have to hope she hasn't gone over. At least the Jedi still have a few friends left. A Dark Jedi could lose them what little support they have. It would be all the hard-liners in the Senate need to make the policy of turning Jedi over to the Yuuzhan Vong legal."

"That could be the least of it, if she finds any of the Emperor's weapons," Vega said. "We know from experience how much damage a single Dark Jedi can do."

"Yes," Vook said softly, "but if that damage were to the Yuuzhan Vong, it is to be desired."

"Vook . . ." Uldir throttled his immediate retort. The Duro had lost his homeworld to the Vong. He was understandably upset.

"I can't imagine how you must feel, Vook," Uldir said. "But the dark side can never be the answer. I didn't learn a lot at the Jedi academy, but I did learn that."

Vook blinked slowly and was silent for a moment.

"I can repair the hyperdrive," he said, apparently dodging any debate.

"You can?"

"Yes. She cut through one of the motivator-engine linkages. That's easily repaired. However, when we dropped from hyperspace, the resulting surge spread out over the rest of the system and fried the remaining motivators. I can realign the one good one to handle the engines, but only for two, maybe three jumps. Then it burns out, too."

"That's terrific," Vega said. "Can we make Mon Calamari?"

"Yes."

"No," Uldir said. "We're going to Wayland."

Vega fixed him with her steely eyes. "And just how will we leave, once we get there? Don't forget, the Yuuzhan Vong have a base on Wayland, too."

"We'll deal with it when the time comes," Uldir replied. "As it is, my last instructions from Master Skywalker were to bring her in for debriefing. That's what we're going to do."

"You're not thinking with your head, boss," Vega said.

"And that's enough of that." Uldir said. "It's not funny anymore." He turned to Vook. "How long until it's done?"

"Three hours, maybe four."

"Fine. Get to it. Vega, you'll help me get us as battle-ready as possible." He raised his voice. "Leaf, how are the repairs on the inner doors coming?"

"Faster if you'd let me work in peace," the Dug's voice came back over the intercom.

Vega was still staring at him. Her eyes and the set of her frame told him she was unhappy with his decision. He didn't like to resort to pulling rank, if he could help it. It was always better when your crew agreed with you. But in this case he wasn't going to entertain any discussions. He would not, could not be responsible for giving a Dark Jedi even the slightest opportunity to resurrect any of the Emperor's old technology. Not even if it killed them all.

\* \* \*

The *No Luck Required* dropped out of hyperspace with a bone-jolting thud. The inertial compensators whined and g-force tried to suck Uldir's brain out of his right ear. A great green world filled most of his view, far too near.

"Nice jump, boss," Vega said.

"What happened?" Uldir demanded, of no one in particular. "We're lucky we didn't end up starfood, coming out this close to a singularity."

Vook answered. "The motivator failed during the jump," he said. "We are no longer hyperdrive capable."

"Well, at least you got us here. Good work, Vook."

"Yes sir," Vook murmured, and added, "We're doomed now, sir."

"No we're not," Uldir replied. "I want you to start exploring options. See if you can cannibalize enough parts to put together one jump, to anywhere. Scan the system for any hulks we might be able to salvage from. Anything. Just get me one more jump, Vook."

The Duro's expression remained unreadable, but he shrugged. "Okay," he said.

"Boss," Vega said, "I've got three objects turning our way."

"Perfect," Uldir said. "What are they?"

"Coralskippers."

Uldir toggled on the intercom. "Leaft, you hear that?"

"Yes," the Dug grunted. "I'm in the turret already."

Uldir flipped to long-range scanners. There were the skips, all right. Like all Yuuzhan Vong tech, the skips were living creatures, modified by advanced biotech into deadly killing vessels. Uldir had dealt with enough of the small furies to know that even one was a problem -- three made for a very bad day indeed.

"It could be worse," he sighed.

"I've got a corvette analog coming around the planetary horizon," Vega said. "I estimate we have about eight minutes to handle the skips before we have to deal with, as well."

"Ah," Uldir said. "So worse. Remind me not to say that again."

"What would be the point in that?" Vega asked. "You don't seem to be handling advice all that well these days, even your own."

"And you're plotting a course toward insubordination, fast," Uldir snapped, starting the ship on a series of evasive maneuvers. "Vook, we've still got full maneuverability?"

"In sublight, yes."

"Fine."

"Permission to speak, sir," Vega said stiffly.

"Vega . . ." he sighed. "What?"

"You don't need me here -- you've got Vook for fire control and repair and Leaft for the turret. Let me take out a starfighter. Even the odds a little."

"That's a fine idea."

"Great." She reached for the buckles of her crash harness.

"Two minutes until maximum range," Vook said.

"Wait," Uldir said. "I meant taking a starfighter out is a good idea. But I'm taking it. You assume command of the *No Luck Required*."

"Boss, that's -- "

"Listen to me. We can't slug it out with every skip in the system. Try to cover my exit with a barrage -- dump some garbage, too, and I'll go out cold silent. Then I want you to get going -- hide someplace, on the planet, in orbit running silent -- whatever. Once I'm clear of the fight, I'll find Klin-Fa Gi, grab her, and bring her back."

"Right. Grab a Dark Jedi."

"I'm the only one of us with any Force sense at all," Uldir said. "So I'm the only one who even stands a chance of even finding her." he paused. "Anyway, I brought her on board. It was my decision to come after her. I'll take the consequences."

Vega looked like some nasty insect had stung her inside her mouth.

"I don't like it," she said.

"You don't have to. I'll find you, don't worry."

"One minute," Vook said.

"Rotate fighter two," Uldir said. With that, he left the helm and hurried toward the starfighter bay.

\* \* \*

A globular bolt of plasma greeted Uldir as his A-wing cleared the fighter bay. He jerked reflexively at the stick -- forgetting he was powered down -- but he was still inside of the *No Luck's* shields, which the blast spread across in rainbow fluorescence. Gritting his teeth, he let the tiny ship drift in the cloud of released garbage. He watched as a spread of proton torpedoes from the *Luck* winked into silent fiery starlets, accompanied by a fusillade of energy bolts from Leaft's position in the turret. His finger itched on the power-up switch. Had the coralskippers seen his ship emerge and targeted him specifically, or was the near-miss merely coincidence? He would know in a few seconds. He had drifted clear of the shields, now, and though the A-wing had many non-factory modifications, its shields were not upgraded. A single solid hit and he wasn't merely out of the action, he was dead.

But the skips were too busy to notice him, thanks to his crew. One was already carrying a livid wound where one of Leaft's lasers had singed along the yorik coral, heating it to incandescence. As he watched, another took the fringe blast of proton torp. For a moment, he thought the fight would be over quickly.

No such luck. He watched, drifting and feeling helpless as the skips closed to their most effective range and the tables turned. Leaft still needled at them with deadly accuracy, but the shots stopped dead in space meters from the organic starfighters. The Yuuzhan Vong ships didn't have shields as such -- instead, the same dovin basals that furnished their gravitic drive opened tiny singularities which swallowed anything they touched -- concussion missiles, torps -- even the coherent light and particles of a blaster bolt vanished into them without a trace. They had their limits of course, and Republic pilots had learned a trick or two about slipping the occasional shot through those gravitic defenses, but it was no easy going. Meanwhile, the skips bombarded the *No Luck Required* with gobs of supercharged plasma, fired from what look for all the world like miniature volcanoes set in the rough surface of the coralskippers. Now they avoided the arc of the turret gun, diving in close. Vega couldn't effectively fire missiles from that range, both because she wasn't likely to hit and because the resulting concussion would damage the transport as well.

"Go, Vega, go!" He muttered. "What are you waiting for?"

But then the *Luck's* drive kicked on and a stream of hot ions engulfed one of the coralskippers, whose pilot had clearly forgotten that an ion drive made an effective if short-range weapon in itself. The voids couldn't swallow all of that. The skip flared orange, yellow, blue -- and was gone.

"That's it!" Uldir muttered, watching the *No Luck Required* dwindle with astonishing speed. The remaining skips went after her, of course, though they had little chance of catching her if she didn't let them. Unless the Vong fighters were hyperdrive capable, which he didn't think they were.

The corvette analog probably was, but it wouldn't go faster-than-light until it was a little farther from the planet. But if they spotted him . . .

He resisted holding his breath as the larger ship cruised by only eight kilometers off his lower starboard. If it noticed him, it gave no indication.

New light caught his eye, as some of the junk ejected with him hit Wayland's outer atmosphere and began to burn. One eye still on the passing cruiser, he reached for his stick. It wouldn't do for him to hit the atmosphere wrong. Too shallow an angle and he'd skip off into space. Too steep and he'd be incinerated. Time for a little course correction.

He didn't bring the ship to full power, instead firing maneuvering thrusters from independent power sources. That steepened his approach. He reached for the stick -- and gaped at what he saw on his sensors.

Three little blips, launched from the cruiser, all headed his way.

So they had been watching the jettisoned junk, and he had revealed himself.

No use cursing the void, his grandmother used to say. It'll get you in the end, and you might as well be on good terms. He went to full power, dropped his nose, and dove planetward. The skips accelerated after him.

"That's right fellows," Uldir grunted. "Bring those flying rocks into the soup with me."

He bumped through high-altitude clouds of ice crystals that shattered the light from Wayland's primary into rainbow and diamond. He flattened his descent a little, noting that the less aerodynamic coralskippers were dropping behind his speedier ship. Their weapons, effective enough in space, lost range in atmosphere. He could probably outrun them easily enough.

He rolled into a tight turn. He couldn't afford to take that chance -- he could outdistance the skips, all right, but they could keep him spotted until craft more apt for atmosphere could vector in on him. Uldir had met a few of their fliers, and some were pretty nasty. If he didn't want to have to deal with fighting the Vong the whole time he was searching for Klin-Fa Gi, he'd better do something about this now.

He aimed his prow at the coralskippers as they hit the turbulence he'd just passed through. He opened up with laser cannons, not really thinking to do much damage at this range, but hoping the brief opening and closing of their voids would roughen the air around them and sap some of their energy reserves. When he was in range, he gave them the present he'd been planning on -- a concussion missile. The weapon was one of his own modification, equipped with a gravitometric sensor. As soon as it sensed a void, it would go.

It blew some ten meters from the lead skip. At such short range, in an atmosphere, a concussion missile had considerable authority, expanding air in a supersonic sphere that slapped the lead coralskipper back the way it had come. The other two had begun peeling away, but not far enough, and both went tumbling. Uldir braced for the milder jolt when the wavefront reached him and began using his laser cannons in earnest, stinging one of the tumbling skips. From his peripheral vision he noted the lead skip falling planetward, apparently unchecked by its gravitic drive. The third skip he could no longer see, but instinct told him he had a few seconds before it picked up his tail.

Yellow plumes of vaporizing coral sent the skip ahead of him pitching and yawing, making it more difficult to hit, but it didn't seem to be using its voids at all. He almost had a solid lock, but that's when the warning in his head went off -- time was up. He yanked on the stick up and port -- and felt blood rush to his head. He'd been right -- streamers of plasma boiled by where he'd been. He tightened into a loop. Both skips were below him, now. He noticed with satisfaction that the fire from the one behind him had struck its brother a glancing blow, and it was burning.

Almost laconically, Uldir drilled the final skip and then sprinted toward the forest far, far below.

\* \* \*

When he was a few meters above the treetops he leveled out and called up a map of the planet. It was well detailed, but few features were actually named. One of them was a dot in the northern hemisphere on the big continent labeled "Mount Tantiss." Wayland had been the Emperor's secret for many years, listed on no star chart due to -- of all things -- an ancient clerical error. Mount Tantiss had been his arcanum and storehouse. Grand Admiral Thrawn had tracked the planet and the mountain down after the Emperor's demise, bent on finding weapons that would help him reclaim what the Empire had lost. Later, Master Skywalker and some of the other heroes of the Rebellion had found it as well and destroyed the mountain with a seismic explosion.

If Klin-Fa Gi was really a Dark Jedi, the ruins of Mount Tantiss were probably where she was headed.

He brought up the transponder overlay. Not surprisingly, it confirmed his suspicions -- the A-wing seemed to be motionless on exactly that spot. Grimly he changed his heading to take him there, keeping a wary eye on long-range sensors.

\* \* \*

Uldir found the A-wing abandoned and hidden by a makeshift covering of huge leaves fallen from the canopy above. He took a deep breath, listening, watching, and smelling the jungle around him, trying to reach out with the limited Force ability he commanded.

From above, Wayland had looked much like Yavin 4, where he had attended the Jedi academy. Here, on the ground, the similarities seemed superficial. Although both Wayland and Yavin's moon had land masses covered mostly in jungle, Wayland's rose higher and stratified into two canopies. The air of Yavin 4 had been spiced with the scent of blueleaf. Here the atmosphere lay heavily on the forest floor, musky and ripe with decay, whirring, buzzing, and click-clackering with the sounds of unfamiliar fauna. He remembered how dangerous the jungles of Yavin 4 had been, and there he had known something of what to expect. This world he did not know at all. The sounds around him might be harmless insects or the Wayland equivalent of Yavin's piranha beetles, which could strip a person to the bone in the time it took a Toydarian to beat its wings.

Still, he was pleased to discover that Klin-Fa Gi seemed even more out of her element here -- her trail of scuffed leaf litter and bent or broken understory was easy enough for him to pick up. It led, as he suspected, up through the foothills surrounding what had once been Mount Tantiss. Somberly, he shouldered a survival pack, his blaster, and a few concussion grenades and set off after her.

At least, he hoped it was her.

It wasn't long before Uldir found evidence that he was indeed following the Jedi and not some strange and clumsy beast. Unfortunately, that evidence came in the form of the five corpses -- sentients, by the look of them, two different species. Neither of the species were Yuuzhan Vong, which meant they were probably locals. Whoever they were, they had been killed by a lightsaber -- few weapons left the same distinct, cauterized slashes as a Jedi's signature weapon.

Grimly, he studied the scene for details. Three of the dead were of a tall, ectomorphic species with six limbs, of which four apparently functioned as arms. They had flexible snouts and their skin -- where bare of the hides and bone ornaments they wore -- glistened like an insect's carapace.

The other two were squat, powerful in appearance, and naturally armored with bony plates on their rounded backs. Like those they lay beside, they seemed to have been basically bipedal.

Uldir had never seen either species before, not in the space lanes or among slaves that the Yuuzhan Vong used as shock troops. That wasn't surprising -- there were plenty of beings in the galaxy who weren't space-going, either because they didn't have the technology or the inclination, and he remembered from his all-too brief scan of the files on this planet that it was supposed to have several intelligent species, all at an essentially stone-age level of technology.

When he saw what they gripped in their dead hands, however, Uldir's blood ran cold. Now he understood something about why they had died. At first glance, their weapons resembled clubs, spatulate on one end and pointed on the other, about thirty centimeters in length. Uldir had seen such weapons before, but even if he hadn't he would have noted something strange in the way that they slowly wriggled, flexing from side to side like Hothan glacier worms. They were alive, and unmistakably of Yuuzhan Vong biofacture.

He studied the bodies more carefully, searching for other signs of the Yuuzhan Vong, wondering if these creatures had been slaves or willing allies. He found no sign of the coral implants the invaders used to control unwilling subjects, which seemed to suggest they were allies.

Still, there were many means of control, and Yuuzhan Vong knew most of them.

As he reached to turn one of the short, armored sentients over to inspect his underside, he suddenly realized that something was wrong. The forest sounds around him had changed, with most of the animal life having fallen silent. He drew his blaster -- casually, as if he really only meant to brush the side of his trousers.

"Lay down shame weapon!" A piping voice commanded in heavily accented Basic. "Lay down shame weapon or breathe-not you, offworlder!"

To emphasize the point, a quivering shaft appeared as if by magic in the tree nearest him. Uldir hesitated -- he had seen arrows before. They had a primitive but effective way of making holes in people. On the other hand, he had a blaster, which made bigger, more efficient holes. But the voice was behind him, and he didn't know how many there were . . .

Whoever it was could have killed him already. He might as well see what the odds were, and what they had to say. He raised his arms slowly, turning toward the voice. He did not lay down the blaster.

The speaker was a stripe of color in the underbrush, hard to see, but Uldir could make out that it was one of the slender, six-limbed humanoids. Uldir breathed slowly and deeply, his eyes tracking through the strange leaves for others.

"Lay down shame weapon," the creature said again.

Uldir kept the weapon above his head, pointed at the sky, but did not do as demanded. He nodded his head at the corpses. "I didn't kill your friends," he said. "I found them like this. I'm in pursuit of the one who did this."

He heard faint rustlings in the brush all around him, and his heart sank. He had probably lost his opportunity to shoot his way out of the situation, if he'd ever had one.

Looking at the dead, however, he found part of him was glad of that.

The creature made a faint trumpeting sound. "If kill Cut-Up-Wish-to-bes, not our enemy," he stated. "Lay down shame weapon. Not tell again."

"I won't be defenseless," Uldir said. "I know what the Yuuzhan Vong do to their captives. I won't be taken captive."

Another trumpeting sound, this one trilled. An answering call came from someplace to his left.

"We not friends of the Cut-Up-People," the sentient said, emphatically. "Never we fodder them."

Uldir could see two more of them now, both of the stockier race. They bore bows, arrows, and stone axes with wooden hafts, like the one who had been speaking. None of them carried anything that looked like Yuuzhan Vong biotech. Uldir's shoulders relaxed a tick.

Deliberately, he returned his blaster to its holster and raised his hands, palm outwards.

"The Yuuzhan Vong are my enemies," he said. "If you are also their enemies, we are friends."

The thin figure swayed forward. "Outworlders not friends," he said. "They bear shame, and bear it upon us."

"I came here only to find the one who left this trail," Uldir said. "When I have her, I will leave. I mean you no harm." He indicated himself.

"My name is Uldir Lockett."

The creature regarded him for a moment. "You offer name?" He said at last.

"Yes. I offer my name."

The being seemed to consider that for a moment. "I offer in return. I am called Txer. I am leader of the Free People."

"Pleased to meet you, Txer."

Txer then said something in his native language, and several of the others -- Uldir now guessed about fifteen -- responded to him. It seemed to be a debate, of sorts, and he suspected the point debated had something to do with whether Uldir got to keep breathing or not. Finally Txer chopped both of his upper hands, and silence fell. He moved closer to Uldir, until they stood only about two meters apart.

"You follow the one who made this trail. She is strong."

"Yes," Uldir said.

"We hear her battle with Cut-Up-Wish-to-bes. Come to see. Hear your shame-thing land, watch you. You come only for her? Is truth?"

"Yes," Uldir replied.

"Why follow her? If they who fight Cut-Up-People your friends, why not her? Your words have Offworld poison in them, maybe."

"It's complicated," Uldir said. "Yes, she is enemy to the -- er, Cut-Up-People. But I fear she seeks something here, something the Emperor left. Do you know of the Emperor?"

Txer trilled loud and long, then babbled again in his own language. A few of the others responded, sharply, and all of the creatures Uldir could see brandished their weapons. His hand itched toward his blaster.

"Dark man," Txer said, finally. "She seeks the things of the Dark Man."

"Yes, I suppose so," Uldir replied.

"So do Cut-Up-People," Txer replied. "They make holes, deep and long, in cracked mountain."

"Yes," Uldir said. "They look for his secrets. So does the one I follow."

"Must not to allow," Txer said, his voice a thin wisp. "Cut-Up- People bad. Dark man worse. All things of shame, his. I remember." His luminescent eyes narrowed. "Also remember some outworlders who broke mountain, buried his things. You cousin to them?"

"Sort of," Uldir replied.

Txer tilted his long head thoughtfully, then spoke some more to his people.

"We also follow this trail," he said, simply.

"I'll appreciate your help," Uldir replied.

"Not to help you," Txer said. "To watch."



\* \* \*

They traveled for the rest of the daylight through steadily steepening terrain. Twice, for no reason Uldir could tell, they hid in thickets, remaining utterly silent until some unspoken signal released them to walk again. That night they camped in the cavernous shelter of the gnarled roots of a fantastically huge tree.

"Why do you call my weapon a shame weapon?" Uldir asked Txer, as the light faded to nothing.

"Is shame to use. Not from life." He paused, searching for words. "Machine," he said at last, as if the word bit him on the way out of his mouth.

"Oh," Uldir replied. It made sense -- these were people who lived simply off what the land provided. Given that the Empire had been here, most of their experiences with technology had probably been of the negative sort.

"Is that why some fight for the Cut-Up-People? Because they also hate machines?" That was putting it mildly, of course. The Yuuzhan Vong considered all "dead" technology to be an abomination, and those who used it so unclean as to deserve extermination. Their conquest of the galaxy was more of a holy war than one for territory -- they had long since conquered worlds enough for their people to live on.

"Wish-to-bes think like this, yes," Txer replied. "They say Cut-Up-People like us. They are not. Life is for respect. They do not respect life. They break it, twist it, make it as they want, make it foul. They do same to us."

"You're right about that," Uldir told him. "I've seen it happen, on world after world. And in the end, those who help them suffer more than those who resist them."

"Offworld wisdom we do not need," Txer said, stiffly. "Free People see this for themselves. Need not your eyes to see."

"I understand that," Uldir said.

"We fight them, like we fought Dark Man," Txer went on.

Stone weapons against the Vong? Uldir thought. That was an uneven fight. Unless the equation changed, the Free People were doomed.

"I should go on alone, when the light comes," Uldir said. "I don't want to put your people in danger."

"We fight them," Txer said firmly. "And if you lie, we fight you too. We fight until offworlders all gone, or until we all die. Sleep now. Tomorrow we enter Cut-Up territory, and then no sleep."

Uldir spent a restless night trying not to worry about his crew, hoping they were still alive and had managed to find a hiding place. He did not think Klin-Fa Gi would stop to sleep, and he felt her drawing ahead of him, and that made him even more anxious.

When he did sleep, his mind built dreams whose architecture was darker than the night.

\* \* \*

"The jungle looks sick," Uldir remarked the next morning. The upper canopy looked ragged and skeletal, and the lower was covered with what looked like a fine mold or dust.

"Yes. Will get sicker," Txer assured him.

It did. Soon they were walking through only the memory of a forest; the mighty trunks were still there, but no hint of green or color of blossoms was anywhere in evidence -- only a drab, charcoal gray.

"What did this?" Uldir asked.

Txer rubbed his mouth. "Not know. No one living has seen what does it. No one dead talks about it."

A kilometer later the trees became charred stumps, obviously scorched by some high heat. The burned zone went off to his left and right for as far as he could see.

Two kilometers later, even the stumps were gone, and they stood on a high ridge looking across a shallow valley at what remained of Mount Tantiss.

Under force of the seismic disruption, the peak had shuddered and collapsed. This side of the mountain had slumped and become a rolling, churned slope of talus. On this vast jumble of basalt, at about the same level he now stood on, grew the Yuuzhan Vong base.

Five of the living compounds looked to be star-shaped, or at least radially symmetrical. This sort of structure Uldir had seen before, in records taken by an erstwhile smuggler named Talon Kaarde. Called damuteks, the Yuuzhan Vong had grown some on the ruins of the Jedi academy when they'd captured the Yavin system a few months earlier. Uldir's old friend Anakin Solo had fought his way through a damutek and had reported a lot of useful information about them.

"I think those are Shaper compounds," Uldir told Txer.

"Shapers?"

"Yes. The Yuuzhan Vong are divided into castes. The Shapers are the ones who make their biotech -- ah, who twist life into the shapes they want. You understand?"

"Yes. Have seen -- not as cut-up as those who fight. Have hair like nest of brvol-snakes."

"Shapers, right. Those compounds are their laboratories. But what's that thing?" He indicated something that resembled a squat cylindrical tower, albeit a crooked one. It was huge, at least a hundred meters high and nearly that in diameter. Like the damuteks, it looked as if it were made of coral. Unlike them, its upper surface seemed to be perforated with hundreds of openings, each of which must be a meter or so in diameter.

Uldir lifted his macrobinoculars and examined the base of the thing more closely, but he couldn't tell much else except -- yes, it seemed to be slowly rotating, as if boring into or out of the ground.

"It's a drill," he muttered.

"Makes holes," Txer said. "We think, anyway."

"A big hole. That's some kind of giant worm, I'd guess, or was before their Shapers got hold of it."

"But one thing we never reckon," Txer said. "If digging, where puts-it rock?"

Uldir looked at Txer, reminding himself that primitive didn't mean stupid.

"That's a good question," he replied. "I guess it digests the rock, somehow, breaks it down. He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. But look, see those capillaries connecting the mine to the rayed compounds?"

"Yes."

"Those must be ways down into the mines the worm is digging. If they find anything, they'll bring them up through there. Which means I'll find Klin-Fa Gi either in the mines or in one of those compounds." He sighed. "In other words, she could be almost anywhere down there."

He moved the macrobinoculars down, and the multitudes of figures moving amongst the compounds resolved into recognizably Yuuzhan Vong shapes, but there were plenty of Myneyrshi -- the tall spindly race -- and Psadans, the armored ones -- as well. There were also more than a few humans, of which Txer's band also included a number -- the descendants of a long-lost colony, if he understood their story correctly.

He focused on the nearest group, who seemed to be tending some sort of plants that grew on slope, just above where the burned zone ended. They were about a hundred meters away, and Uldir saw no Yuuzhan Vong guards.

"Maybe I can pass for one of them," Uldir speculated. "If they've caught Klin-Fa, there ought to be talk about it. If they haven't, there might be talk about that too."

But looking up at the complex, he didn't feel much hope. He didn't have the leisure time to insinuate himself into the Yuuzhan Vong camp the way Anakin Solo had done on Yavin 4 -- Vega and the rest were out there, possibly fighting for their lives, waiting for him to finish his mission here and get back into space. Every second he spent here was a risk not just to his own life but to his crew's, and for that matter to everyone he and his crew might have rescued if they weren't here chasing one rogue Jedi.

"Jedi," he murmured, and Txer narrowed his eyes.

"What Jedi?" He asked, suspiciously. "You Jedi?"

"No, I'm not. The one I chase."

Uldir closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to ignore his body, his thoughts, his immediate surroundings, to feel through the living Force around him. To search for Klin-Fa Gi. She was probably the only living Jedi on Wayland, and the Yuuzhan Vong did not appear in the Force at all. Klin-Fa ought to stand out like a Wookiee at a Tintinna wedding, even to his less-than attuned senses.

The sounds around him faded thin and were forgotten. In the outward-reaching eye of his mind, he was a sphere, expanding, not so much taking in all that he touched, but reminding himself that he was already a part of it.

He felt the belt of sickly life behind him, growing stronger as it marched away from the Yuuzhan Vong settlement. He felt the verge of death and pain he stood on, and the odd blankness of the Yuuzhan Vong themselves. He felt the fractured stones of Mount Tantiss.

Part of him was excited. He'd never commanded this sort of clarity in the Force, even on his best day at the academy.

And yes, better still, there, a flicker, he felt Klin-Fa Gi, and it seemed she was near. He felt her heart pounding, sensed danger, a goal reached, something desired found . . .

Then a black spike of anger and despair struck him between the eyes, and a shriek of hatred that was somehow more the taste of salt and bitter Jiqui peels than a sound.

His tenuous hold on the Force snapped, replaced by another sensation, a sort of burring in his bones.

It took him a moment to understand the feeling was coming from beneath him, up through his feet, that it was the ground trembling. And it was growing stronger. He opened his eyes, gazing at the ruined mountain, at the terrible Vong-thing growing into it.

Something was different, but it took him a moment to place it. Then he saw, but still didn't understand. The tower was larger, puffy, bloated looking.

"Txer," he said, "Run. Now." He bolted down the hill, across the blasted landscape toward the Yuuzhan Vong settlement.

"Why?" Txer shouted from behind him.

"Just do it!" He didn't have time to explain that he wasn't quite sure why, but that if he waited to think it through they would all be dead.

A glance behind him showed Txer and his Free People still hesitating. "Come on!" he howled.

Txer started forward. After that, Uldir kept all of his attention on the rocky path and the rumbling in the planet that grew stronger with each footfall. He ran, hoping the Free People followed -- hoping his luck hadn't betrayed him at last.

He'd reached the bottom of the foothill they'd stood upon and just started up the slope toward the damuteks when he heard shouts from the sentients behind him. The Psadan, who were basically armored spheres, were mostly rolling down the hill. The Myneyrshi were having a bit more trouble with their delicate looking legs. As they started uphill, however, their positions were reversed. The Myneyrshi pulled themselves gracefully up the slope with their six limbs, while the Psadan began to lag behind. It was Txer who first shouted and exclaimed, and Uldir followed the direction the fellow indicated with his gaze. The vibration in the ground was rattling his teeth, now.

The tower bristled. From each of the hundreds of openings on its upper surface, a snaky tube emerged and lengthened, arcing in unison out over the valley and toward the foothills in what looked like slow motion, but which, given the distances involved, was probably quite fast. Each of the tubes was headed for a slightly different destination. Many of them seemed to be coming straight toward Uldir.

Uldir quickened his pace.

"What is?" Txer asked.

"We have to make it out of the burned zone!" Uldir shouted. "To the first of the Yuuzhan Vong gardens."

He glanced up, and could see the dark mouths of the tubes facing down now, like cave worms coming to take a bite out of him. How low did they have to get? The sky was full of the arcing shafts now, some aimed far beyond the ridge. It might have been curiously pretty if he didn't remember the perimeter of destruction, if the burned zone didn't fit so well with the geometry of what he was seeing.

They were about to find out what the drilling-worm digested rock into, and he didn't think they were going to enjoy the enlightenment.

The end of the scorch-zone was just ahead, but the Psadans weren't doing so well. One stumbled, and Txer supported him. Another slipped back near Uldir. He bit his lip. If he paused to help the Psadan, he might die, which was one thing, but then he would fail his mission, which was altogether another. He couldn't . . .

No. Whatever else his mission was, first and foremost it was to help his fellow being in need.

He put a shoulder under the Psadan's stout arm, and together they struggled toward the strip of green ahead. They had maybe thirty meters to go -- some of the Myneyrshi had already reached it.

The sky was a vault of black cords now, and an opening wide enough to swallow Uldir was dropping swiftly toward him. He didn't think it would swallow him, though. He wondered, in fact, if he would feel much of anything.

The smaller rocks on the hillside were actually rattling now, from the pressure building below them. Any moment now . . .

Uldir's foot struck a rock wrong, and he slipped down, his ankle twisting painfully as the Psadan's weight fell disproportionately on him. Grunting apologetically, the Psadan tried to lift him into a carry.

"Too late," Uldir muttered.

He didn't see the yellow-and-black clad figure until she was beside him, until her strength had flowed into him and he and the Psadan were practically carried forward to the edge of the Yuuzhan Vong fields by the power of the Force.

"You're an idiot, Uldir Lockett," Klin-Fa-Gi informed him.

The Free People shouted as one, as out and across the valley the hundreds of tubes coughed out a fluorescent orange haze. The smell was lightning against stone, hot copper hitting water. The haze collected in low spots, cooling to blood red and then nearly black, rolling over the hills in an expanding torus which left the Yuuzhan Vong base and gardens -- and thankfully, Uldir Lockett -- untouched in the center.

"What is it?" Tser asked, waving at the terrifying sight.

"Mining vents," Klin-Fa Gi said, briskly. The Chom-Vrone chews up rocks and digests into a state of semi-plasma in a process a lot like the weapons their skips use. When it has a full load, it spews it in a perimeter around their settlement, as you see. Keeps things clear and undesirables out."

"Yeah," Uldir grunted. "Or almost all of them, anyway." He noticed that she had a few new wounds, though none of them looked serious. She also had something strapped to her back, something wrapped in layers of what seemed to be living tissue.

"What's that you've got?"

"Never mind that now," Klin Fa said. "We've other troubles." She pointed. Coming down in a wave from the settlement above were dozens of Yuuzhan Vong warriors. Behind Uldir, the curtain of superheated rock vapor was still spreading. They could face the warriors or fry.

"Well," Uldir grunted. "At least we have our backs to a wall."

**To Be Continued...**